

No to a Maine Woods National Park and Preserve: A Rebuttal of Jym St. Pierre's "Rescuing the Heart of the Maine Woods"

By JEFFREY ROWE

Abstract

Given the importance of the Maine Woods to the state's economy, as well as to its historical and cultural identity, the recent amount of concern surrounding the condition of both the woods and the forest products industry is not surprising. As the debate has been heating up over the past several years, however, the environmental conditions that have given rise to many of those debates have actually been improving. Moreover, when it comes to the condition of the Maine forest products industry, proponents of a Maine Woods National Park and Preserve proposal cite developments that may make superficial sense, but which rarely hold up under scrutiny or when put in a broader economic context.

Few places in the eastern United States have lodged themselves as firmly in the public's imagination as the millions of acres known as the Maine Woods. Since the earliest Europeans began to settle and wander about the Northeast, the vast forests of northern and western Maine have lured explorers, captured the hearts of sportsmen, and stood as a reminder of a primeval past to all who have either seen these woods or read about them from afar.

At once a far-reaching landscape dotted with lakes and mountains, and a rough, dense countryside offering incomparable isolation and solitude, the woods of Maine have been, for more

than 200 years, an inspiration for countless observers. Many writers, most notably Henry David Thoreau, have memorialized them by their prose, and many readers have been drawn to visit them by the power of what they have read.

At the same time as the Maine Woods have fueled the imaginations of outdoors lovers of all types, they have, from the days of the earliest settlers, provided the raw material needed to build all shapes and sizes of essential commodities, from masts for ships to beams for houses to the pulp that has gone into the pages of countless magazines, newspapers, and books. In other words, while the Maine Woods have been beckoning those seeking refuge from society, they have also been fueling the growth of, and providing a foundation for, an industry which has met the material demands of a spreading society while providing solid livelihoods for scores of rural Maine communities, and tens of thousands of Maine citizens, over the course of several generations.

Since the early 1600s, when English explorers first cut trees on Monhegan Island, the forest products industry has been an integral part of the region's economic fabric. In 1634, the first sawmill, powered by water, was built at South Berwick. The first sawmill in Bangor was built in 1772, and by 1832, Bangor had become the largest shipping port for lumber in the world. In the mid-1830s, Bangor was home to more than 300 sawmills, and between 1832 and 1888, more than 8.7 billion board feet of lumber were shipped from Bangor.

Fast forward to the present, and the reality is still very much one of the Maine Woods serving as the foundation for an industry that plays an indispensable role in the livelihoods of tens of thousands of Maine citizens. According to a recent

study by the North East State Foresters Association, the contribution of forest-based manufacturing and forest-related tourism and recreation to the Maine economy is over \$6.5 billion per year. Moreover, the forest-based manufacturing industry provides employment for roughly 30,000 people and generates wages and salaries of \$1 billion. As for forest-based recreation and tourism, those sectors provide employment for over 7000 people, with an approximate annual payroll of \$51 million.

When outlined so starkly, it seems inevitable that the two views of the Maine Woods — as a natural wonder on the one hand, and as a source of raw material for an entire industry on the other — should come into conflict. Of course, until relatively recently, the reality has been that those views, however divergent in theory, have been able to coexist quite easily. After all, the area in question encompasses several million acres, so it has easily been able to accommodate the desires of multiple user groups. Maine has a long-standing tradition of open access to its woods — even the millions of acres owned by the large, industrial landowners — so there has never been a question of whether the Maine Woods could endure both industrial and recreational use.

Perhaps more importantly, despite the romantic allure of the region, the Maine Woods have been far from the population centers of the northeastern United States, and it is safe to say that only a tiny percentage of the populations of points south, not to mention even a minority of citizens living in southern or coastal Maine, ever made the trip to the so-called "Big Woods." Consequently, for most of its existence, the forest products industry in Maine has operated far out of view of the majority of the general public. People knew the Maine Woods

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were home to an industry, but little attention was paid either to the woods as an industrial resource, or to the industry which used that resource as a source of raw material.

Over the last 40 years, the distance, both in physical and psychological terms, between the Maine Woods and the rest of the country has narrowed considerably. A number of phenomena have led to this change. First, the burgeoning environmental consciousness among the general public has led to ever-increasing scrutiny of the practices of the forest products industry in Maine, just as it has led to heightened concerns about, and scrutiny of, much of modern, industrialized society. Furthermore, as surrounding regions and states have grown thick with settlements, cities, and most recently, the suburbs of modern society, the Maine Woods have been increasingly viewed as both a refuge from a hectic world and a treasure trove of rapidly disappearing ties to a simpler, more sustainable lifestyle.

In recent years, the focus on the Maine Woods has arguably been more intense than at any time in history. Concerns about the condition of the woods have led to three statewide referenda and several truckloads of legislative proposals. As the debate has raged concerning the environmental future of the woods, concerns have also arisen over the future of a forest products industry that has struggled with the impact of increased global competition and increasingly uncertain regulatory and economic conditions. On top of this come fears that the Maine Woods are being lopped into pieces and sold to the highest bidder at such a rate that soon only the wealthy and the well-connected will have anything approaching the freedom of access which Mainers and others have long taken for granted.

Given the importance of the Maine Woods to both the state's economy and its historical and cultural identity, the amount of concern surrounding the condition of both the woods and the forest products industry is not surprising.

There is a difference, however, between recognizing that a landscape which looms so large in both physical and economic terms is, like every place else in the world, encountering changes and challenges which require the attention and understanding of various stakeholders, and succumbing to the vague belief that those problems are threatening the very existence of an entire place and way of life.

It is safe to say that this latter belief lies at the base of the proposal put forward by the group called RESTORE: The North Woods to create a Maine Woods National Park and Preserve. Indeed, an article recently published in this journal by Jym St. Pierre, the Maine Director of RESTORE was entitled "Rescuing the Heart of the Maine Woods" [*AJES* 9(2) 2002]. While that title has considerable dramatic resonance, it effectively casts the terms of the discussion in terms that are more than a little simplistic and misleading.

One of the ironies of the debates concerning the future of the Maine Woods involves the fact that as the debate has been heating up over the past several years, the environmental conditions which have given rise to many of those debates have been improving, and the evidence documenting that improvement has been steadily piling up. Moreover, when it comes to the condition of the forest products industry, proponents of the RESTORE proposal cite developments that may make superficial sense, but they rarely hold up under scrutiny or when put in a broader economic context. Finally, even were the analyses of the Maine Woods and the forest products industry roughly accurate, the arguments presented on behalf of the proposal either overstate the benefits of a park, or they neglect to mention the myriad negative developments that would likely accompany a Maine Woods National Park.

To get the most accurate and current assessment of the environmental condi-

tion of the Maine Woods, one need look no further than to the Annual Inventory reports which the Maine Forest Service (MFS) is compiling in tandem with the USDA Forest Service. (Proponents of the park generally cite an inventory conducted by MFS in 1995, but for purposes of accuracy and relevance it is clearly better to use the latest data, which is readily available from the Maine Forest Service.) Begun in 1999 as an ongoing partnership, the annual forest inventory measures a 20% statewide sample of Maine's forests every year. The goal is to complete a full inventory of Maine's forests in five year cycles, and at the end of the first three years of the cycle MFS reported that "In 2001, Maine's forests had an estimated inventory of 279 million cords of merchantable wood (pulpwood quality or better); this is a significant increase (+10%) from the 1995 inventory estimate of 254 million cords."

In addition to its annual forest inventory, MFS is also obliged to produce a *Biennial Report on the State of the Forest and Progress Report on Forest Sustainability Standards*. In its most recent report, released in the fall of 2001, MFS reported that "The 1999 inventory shows Maine has 37% more timber than the first U.S. Forest Service inventory in 1959." These figures come after years of debate over the amount of clearcutting being performed in the Maine Woods, intensive harvesting which was prescribed largely so that the state's major landowners could harvest broad swaths of forest before they were lost to a massive spruce budworm infestation. Indeed, while still viewed by the public as the biggest threat to the Maine Woods, clearcutting, according to MFS, is now used in approximately 2% of the annual harvest performed in Maine.

Along with improved inventory reports has come the rise of forest certification programs. Arguably the most dramatic development in forest management in the last quarter century, the goal of forest certification systems is to

develop standards that ensure that forests are being managed with an eye toward protecting all the values that forests provide to society. Concerns such as sustainable harvest rates, the protection of water quality, and the continuation of appropriate levels of biodiversity, among others, are all factors in forest certification systems.

In this country, the two most prevalent certification systems were created by the American Forest & Paper Association (AF & PA) and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Members of the Maine forest products community have participated in both programs, as well as in other programs such as the American Tree Farm System. While the details of a forest certification program can be numbing even to professional foresters, all the various systems can be roughly described as establishing a set of forest management standards that forest landowners must demonstrably meet, when audited by independent experts, in order to be certified by a program as managing forestland sustainably.

Naturally, there is considerable competition among the various programs, competition that has led to changes in all of them as they attempt to spread their programs. To date, however, nearly 6.5 million acres of Maine forestland, both private and public, have been certified by at least one of the major certification programs.

In addition to the spread of certification programs throughout the Maine Woods, the last few years have also seen an increase in the number of acres consigned to conservation easements both large and small. While the details vary among different easements, all are binding arrangements whereby landowners sell forever their rights to develop their land while retaining sustainable timber harvesting and open access for much of the general public. Currently, some two million acres of Maine forest are protected from future development by conservation easements.

While proponents of a national park typically ignore or deny the improving environmental condition of the Maine Woods, they are quick to point to what they perceive as the death of the forest products industry in order to present a national park as a necessary alternative. Here again, the facts run counter to popular perception. Clearly, the forest products industry has been struggling with many of the same issues that have plagued manufacturing sectors throughout the country. The globalization of the economy has introduced the competition of countries that can offer, among other things, cheaper labor and raw material costs, and many companies, most notably in the secondary wood products manufacturing sector, have not been able to survive. But at the same time improvements in technology and production processes have greatly improved the efficiency of companies throughout the production chain, from logging operations to paper mills, resulting in thousands of jobs that are safer and more productive than ever before.

Perhaps more importantly, research into new uses for Maine's plentiful timber varieties continues at places like the University of Maine's Advanced Engineered Wood Composites Center, and the Maine Department of Conservation recently announced that it will be funding a study of the Maine forest products industry with an eye toward identifying opportunities for future growth. The primary goal of the study is to develop a 20-year vision for the industry, a vision with which the state would then assist the industry in implementing.

In many ways, the myth of the dying forest products industry is the result of the vision many people have of the Maine Woods as a timeless naturalist's paradise. The purity of such a vision does not allow for the inevitable ebb and flow of a market economy, nor for the increasing rate of change that comes with competition and technological innovation.

Change has always been a part of the forest products industry, but there is a difference between recognizing change as inevitable while working to mitigate the potentially harmful impacts on individuals and communities, and interpreting change as the death knell for an entire way of life.

Similarly, alarms raised about the recent rate of land sales overlook the fact that most of the land has simply changed hands between one member of the forest products community and another. Indeed, in sections of Maine fragmentation of the forests is clearly a problem, as development pressures drive land prices ever higher. Here again, however, the answer is not to conclude that a park presents the only salvation for the Maine woods, but to recognize that supporting and strengthening the forest products industry is still the best way to maintain the traditions of multiple use that have been a Maine trademark for centuries.

In many ways, the Maine Woods National Park proposal is presented as a panacea for much of what supposedly ails the Maine Woods. While, on the one hand, those ailments are not nearly as severe as park proponents would have the public believe, on the other hand, their proposal is not without flaws of its own. Those flaws are most evident when viewed in the light of the long-standing tradition that has allowed multiple, concurrent uses of the Maine Woods.

Obviously, it can be difficult to argue against the idea of a national park. When kept in the soft focus of the general public's perception, parks are viewed as places open for all citizens to enjoy largely whenever they wish. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that not all parks are created equally, and national parks in particular often come with restrictions that can lead to persistent legal wrangling among an array of interest groups arguing over who gets to use what part of whichever public lands specifically in question.

Proponents of the Maine Woods National Park like to paint their idea with the sheen of populist sentiment. But one need not pay too close attention to the debates out West to realize that consigning a huge swath of the Maine Woods to public ownership would inevitably result in many of those debates coming soon to a nearby courthouse. Indeed, increased pressure on the Maine Woods for its multiple values will lead inevitably to more conscious and considered relationships between those who own the woods and those who want to use them. Despite what proponents of the park proposal claim, however, it is much more in keeping with local Maine tradition to keep those relationships, as much as possible, between private parties, rather than calling in the federal government as if it were some sort of savior.

Whether it is their misrepresentation of either the environmental condition of the Maine Woods or the economic condition of the industry that has lived and worked in those woods for generations, or whether it is the glossing over of the considerable problems implicit in their favored "solution," proponents of a Maine Woods National Park have clearly not made the case for the necessity or desirability of their proposal. They are correct in pointing out the unique appeal of the Maine Woods, but they are wrong in claiming that the attributes that have led to that appeal are in danger of disappearing forever. Like the rest of the world, the Maine Woods are changing, but the evidence is mounting each year that the changes can be managed by those who know the woods best — the citizens of Maine, both inside and outside the forest products industry, who have worked, lived, and played in the Maine Woods for generations, and who are committed to keeping the woods productive, sustainable, and accessible to all for generations to come.



Canoe carry in winter.

PAT WILLIS